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ABSTRACT

A college professor (on the elementary language arts and children's literature faculty) and a doctoral candidate (also writing coordinator for an Illinois school district) team-taught a graduate language arts course at Northern Illinois University, implementing practices that reflected their pedagogical and political convictions. Both wanted the course to reflect and embody their philosophies about teaching, about learning, about the curriculum, and about what a classroom should be. They wanted to share power and decision-making with students, and to have a collaborative classroom. They rewrote the class syllabus to begin with process writing, recognized the inherent tensions in what they wanted to do, negotiated who would teach what and other responsibilities, and began in the third week of the session to collect data for research. Uneasy at first, students embraced what was happening and took ownership of their own learning processes once group work began. The two teachers struggled with the desire for group process versus the urge to lecture because of time constraints. Real change and growth were observed and documented among the students in their perceptions of themselves as writers, learners, and teachers, along with reservations about the approach and its use in their classrooms. The two collaborating teachers came away with fresh awareness and respect for collaborative reflection as a powerful tool both in shaping curriculum and for the teacher as researcher. (SR)

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"The Negotiated Curriculum as Praxis in the World of the Classroom"
Paper Presented at the 11th Annual Conference
on Curriculum Theorizing
Dayton, Ohio
October 21, 1989

Ann Trousdale
Roxanne Henkin

A: This session is entitled "The Negotiated Curriculum as Praxis in the World of the Classroom": We will be talking about our struggles to come to terms with the political nature of our own teaching practices as we team-taught a graduate language arts course at Northern Illinois University--and how we implemented practices that reflected our pedagogical and political convictions.

I am Ann Trousdale. I am on the elementary language arts and children's literature faculty at Northern Illinois University.

R: I am Roxanne Henkin. I am currently a doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University. I am also the writing coordinator for the Elmhurst, Illinois, School District and an instructor for the Illinois Writing Project. This means that I spend a good deal of my time teaching teachers in workshop situations, classes, and inservice training. Previously, I was an elementary classroom teacher for 16 years.

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A: I met Roxanne a year and a half ago when she came to talk to me about the possibility of my being on her doctoral committee. We found that we shared many views in common--and I learned about Roxanne's experience with a process approach to writing in her own first grade classroom and with the Illinois Writing Project.

R: The outcome of that meeting was that I asked Ann to be on my doctoral committee.

A: The next time I saw Roxanne was the first day of summer school that summer, when she was sitting in my graduate language arts class. I was a bit insecure in teaching process writing at that point--especially with helping teachers with practical problems in their classrooms; I had never used the approach with children myself. As I went over the course outline, conscious of Roxanne sitting there, I was a bit uneasy at the thought of teaching something that one of my "students" knew more about than I did!

R: I had really wanted to take a class with Ann, but it became clear that this class was very similar to the workshops that I conduct for teachers. I slipped out of class at break and went to see my advisor, Jane Davidson, who suggested that I take the class as an internship. This way I could still work with Ann. So I went back to the class and asked Ann at the break if she would consider the idea.

A: It sounded good to me and I agreed.

R: Ann really had no time to consider this decision. When she agreed, I left to take care of the new registration. Ann made this decision to work with me, based on the one talk that we had together.

A: After class we met and began began to talk about what we wanted the course to be. As I outlined to Roxanne what I wanted, I found that we were in basic agreement philosophically, but that she was willing to go even further than I was in implementing our common philosphy in practical ways.

R: We were both concerned that things we say should be going on in classrooms are not necessarily going on in university classrooms.

A: We say what goes on in the classroom should relate to the real world of the students and be shaped to the students' own lives and interests, yet we stick to a pre-set syllabus.

R: We say read to your students every day, share your love for literature--but we seldom take the time to read to our students something that has touched us, or inspired us, or given us pleasure, or made us think.

A: We say we don't have time to do personal writing in the classroom, take time to talk about our writing, turn to one another for help with it--so we teach about writing processes, we teach about collaborative learning, we teach about group work.

R: We are asking teachers to model reading and writing for their students, but not only do university teachers not model their own reading and writing processes, they don't even provide opportunity for students to experience their own.

A: The hidden message is "Do as I say, not as I do."

R: So we wanted the course to reflect our philosophies about teaching, about learning, about the curriculum, about what a classroom should be.

A: We were conscious of the power which the teacher traditionally has in the classroom. We wanted to accomplish a shift in power--to make our classroom a place of shared power, of shared decision-making.

R: We wanted to challenge traditional notions of who's got the knowledge--the teacher--and whose knowledge counts--the teacher's. To do this we needed to structure the typical university class so that the students participated in the literacy experiences in a meaningful way. We wanted this to be a collaborative classroom where we all worked together and learned from each other.

A: We rewrote the class syllabus. The course that we outlined was in some ways similar to the course I had planned, but in other ways changed it.

R: We decided to begin with process writing. Process writing can be contrasted to the old model of writing that most of us

grew up with. We would write a first draft, edit it, and then hand it in to the teachere. More than likely, it was returned to us filled with red marks. How many of us learned from the red marks? How many of us even carefully looked at all the red marks?

Process writing puts the emphasis on the process of writing. We may prewrite and write a first draft. We may talk with others about our writing in writing conferences and revise parts of our draft. This process is recursive, so that you might discuss and revise or revise and discuss, but in any case, the emphasis is on the meaning of the writing. Only when this process is completed does the attention move to proofreading.

We wanted the class to be a writing workshop, where students worked on writing of their own choice, and with the help of classmates, take one piece through the whole process from the idea's inception through publication.

A: We would emphasize personal response to literature, using methods aimed at affirming students in their own ability to interpret both poetry and fiction. Other strands in the course included storytelling, oral interpretation of literature, and ways to integrate the curriculum through the use of literature.

R: We wanted our classroom to be a model for collaborative learning which meant that the students would learn from each other by sharing information, ideas, and experiences. We would function as facilitators--structuring the activities so that teachers actually experienced working in groups. Rather than lecture about exemplary language arts practices, we wanted our students to experience them. Also, rather than lecturing or directly teaching information, we first wanted to elicit the knowledge and experience of class members. Then we'd add information that wasn't elicited or discussed.

A: We used response journals. We asked the students to write written responses to certain of their readings for the class. I believe very strongly in written reseponse as a way to reflect upon, organize, synthesize, and question what one has read. The students turned in their responses and we used the journals as dialogue journals; we would respond in writing to the students' writing.

R: We wanted to empower our own students through using methods in our class that would foster their own confidence in themselves as readers, as thinkers, as writers, as learners, as teachers, as decision makers.

A: We recognized that there would be tensions inherent involved in what we wanted to do:

First we were changing the course outline and the students

would be confronted with that. We were adding a teacher; in fact Roxanne would be taking over large portions of the class right from the start. This in itself challenges the notion of there being one teacher in a classroom: and we wanted there to be thirty!

I have found that many teachers in the area come from highly traditional backgrounds. Many welcome change, but many are resistant to change, to new ideas and approaches. I have found that many of my graduate students expect to be told what to do and to be provided ways to do it. This is what they have known: they have been socialized--they have been deprofessionalized--in that way.

R: We wanted to break through that, to put teachers back in touch with a respect for their own knowledge, an awareness of themselves as intellectual beings; to re-establish confidence in their own abilities to think through and make decisions.

A: We were also up against some other challenges: There were a number of students in the class who were taking this graduate language arts class purely because it was required for a Master's Degree in Elementary Education; there was a small group of students who were resentful of having to be in the class at all--resentful at having to take a class that they felt would have little bearing on their own areas. This is a

summary of the make-up of the class:

R: 8 primary grades teachers, K-3

A: 9 upper elementary teachers, grades 4 and 5

R: 2 middle school-junior high teachers, grades 6-9

A: 2 who had never taught, going for Masters plus Certification

R: 1 vocal music teacher

A: 1 physical education teacher

R: 1 teacher of art who also was a Headstart aide

A: 1 teacher of special ed on preschool level

R: 1 industrial arts teacher

A: 1 teacher of science and reading on the 5th and 6th grade level

R: 1 5th and 6th grade social studies teacher

A: 1 5th grade teacher of math, science and social studies

R: 1 6th thru 8th grade learning disabilities resource teacher

We began to negotiate who would teach what. We wanted to share the teaching and decision-making. We decided that I would teach the writing component. I felt pleased about this decision for I had been teaching process writing classes collaboratively, and felt that writing was a good place to begin our collaborative work in the language arts class.

A: I was delighted--and relieved--that Roxanne wanted to do that; I thought the writing strand would be stronger with her

teaching it--and that I would learn from her. Which I did. We decided that I would teach the aspects of the course that had to do with literature: personal response to literature, storytelling, oral interpretation of literature, and integration of the curriculum through literature webs.

R: I was pleased about this. I felt that I could learn a lot from Ann in this area. What happened is that we were both responsible for the areas that we considered our strengths. By teaching this course together, we brought to it more than either us us would have brought to it alone.

R: Originally there had been a mid-term and final exam scheduled as well as other projects. I questioned Ann on the purpose of the exams. First of all they represented the power of the teacher, and took away from our collaborative focus. Secondly, we were teaching adult students and the major question that arose was what we hoped they would learn and how they could demonstrate this understanding. The final papers and the literature webs would reveal students' understanding of the concepts in a meaningful, purposeful way. So we decided to eliminate the exams.

A: We decided that we would split other responsibilities: responding to the response journals, evaluating papers and projects.

R: So at the second class meeting, we approached class about the change: that we would be team teaching the class and that there would be a new syllabus....

We shared some of our philosophy. Ann had touched on it the first day, but now we elaborated on it.

We discussed collaborative learning and how we'd be collaboratively working together.

We talked about how we wanted the course to be shaped to their needs and interests;

We encouraged them to become a part of the decison-making processes in terms of negotiating the curriculum with us;

And we explained how were were new to this process too, and how we would be willing to share our thoughts, processes, questions with them throughout the course.

A: Roxanne began teaching the writing component the second week of class. As we discussed what seemed to be happening in class, it occurred to us that we might be making certain assumptions that we were not sure were true. We decided to explore ways to tap into the students' learning processes so that we could better shape our teaching to what was actually going on with them rather than to what we **thought** was going on.

R: It seemed to me the perfect opportunity to conduct research.

There we two of us, so often one person could be free to collect data. Since we believed so strongly in collaborative learning, this would be our opportunity to document and look more closely at student growth and interactions. I had often seen change in the writing workshops that I conducted, but this would give me the opportunity to study that change, and reflect on it with another person who was as involved as I was. We decided to videotape the class sessions, audiotape the small group work, have students fill out data and response sheets, and to write field notes after each session.

So in the third week of summer session we approached the class about collecting information from them by way of feedback sheets and taping of their group work. They agreed--except for one group which initially didn't want to be tape recorded. This group later changed its mind and asked to be recorded.

A: We were aware of the fact that, in approaching the class in this way, for these reasons, we were further discarding a part of the teacher's omniscient stance: we were acknowledging that we didn't necessarily know what was happening in our class and that we needed them to tell us.

R: We were already into the writing process when the data collection began

[R. will summarize here]

A: As I watched Roxanne teach the writing component of the course, I was indeed learning a great deal from her--but at the same time it seemed to me that she was spending a lot of time eliciting from the class information that I usually provided through lecture: how we all have different writing processes, what happens in writing conferences and what helps and what doesn't help in writing conferences...

I felt pressure also because I knew there were other areas to cover in the class, and all of this generating of information from the class was taking a lot of time. There were times when I knew it would be more efficient just to tell them, rather than to elicit the same information from them.

R: The question of time is a legitimate one that we often hear from the teachers about their own classrooms. With so much curriculum to cover, they don't have time to devote to process. Yet, thinking takes time, and group process takes titme. It comes down to one's own beliefs and commitment. We might not cover everything in our curriculum, but what we do teach, we teach in depth.

The students seemed to be confused or reluctant at first. They were uneasy with the change in roles. Once the group work began though, they started to embrace what was happening and to take ownership of their own learning processes.

A: I began to see what Roxanne's methods of eliciting information from the students were doing. Not only was information forthcoming in ways that were more significant to them, more integrated with their own growth and understanding--it was far more empowering.

And yet I must confess I still feel a bit of a tension there. It seems to me that in a course of this kind there is--or should be--information, concepts which are new to many if not most of the students, and that one way to convey that information is through lecture. It seems to me idealistic to assume that all the information, all the significant content, of such a course is already possessed by the students, and that the teacher's job is simply to elicit it.

There are theoretical perspectives, findings of recent study and research, that to my mind are appropriate for class lecture. In the language arts, for example, we do not all have knowledge about theories and stages of language acquisition in young children--stuff that's foundation to our philosophy and approach in teaching language arts. We do not all know what invented spelling is or what stages children go through in spelling inventively. In fact many teachers have a prejudice against allowing spelling that is not correct. These kinds of foundations should be laid I think and can be appropriately laid through lecture. Yet there may be some

students who are familiar with those concepts and may not need to hear lectures on such topics. I find a real tension there I have not found a resolution to.

R: I guess that as an elementary teacher and as a graduate student, I've sat through many inservice session and classes where people have assumed that I had no knowledge of a topic. I've often wondered how they can lecture without knowing what I know or where I'm coming from. Probably my sensitivity on this topic is what led me to facilitative style of teaching myself. Sometimes I felt that Ann might have generated more of her lecture information from the students.

[So in my own teaching] I'm always looking for way to ask the students to share what they know about a topic, before presenting my information. We know from the research on adult learning that you don't have to teach adults information that they can read or learn on their own. To promote adult learning, we can provide materials and opportunities, but it is up to the adult to learn.

A: I noticed that Roxanne would often bring closure to a discussion by citing research that confirmed what the students themselves had been saying. As time went on, the students were more ready to share their knowledge and more confident about doing it. We could see them begin to flex their intellectual and pedagogical muscles!

It was also clear during these times that as a class we were generating knowledge, understanding, wisdom, application that was far beyond what any one of us could have come up with alone.

This issue of teacher-directed learning I saw reflected in the students' own processes as I was reading transcripts of the writing conferences. The students worked in groups of three, with two peers "giving a conference" to the student whose work was being considered. With one group in particular, in the early stages of the process, the student whose writing was being discussed would assume a a traditional "student" stance. The student would read his or her piece to the others, then ask a question like, "Okay, what should I change?" The other two, in turn, would assume the traditional directive-teacher role, and tell the writer what to do.

At one point one of the students, Casey, realized that they were being overly directive, ("I feel kind of guilty," she said; "Maybe that's not what he wants to do with his own writing." She changed her strategy to give the writer more ownership of the revising process.

In a later conference, there was a subtle yet important shift: this same student finished reading her piece and said, "I wonder if I should put that in there?" Not tell me

whether I should put that in there--and Tim responded, "If you're worried about it." She was taking responsibility for her own decision-making and he was leaving the decision with her. In the earlier conferences the two students who were taking the "teacher" roles seemed to feel that their part was to rush in with suggestions for improvement. Now they were allowing the writer to reflect on her own piece and articulate her own thought processes.

In observing what was going on here, I have begun to wonder: do we as teachers see ourselves as fillers of perceived vacuums? Or do I? If I see what looks to me to be a vacuum, a blank, a space of uncertainty, do I think I must rush in to fill it?

Do we as teachers abhor a vacuum?

Do we overteach to get rid of the discomfort of them?

Do we perceive vacuums where there are really just times of reflection, of analysis, of contemplation, of coming to a decision or judgment?

How often do we short circuit that very important process?

R: We have strong results from the research in wait time. If a teacher can wait three to five seconds after asking a question, and then another three to five seconds when the student has paused after answering a question, higher level thinking occurs in the students. This research holds across

subject areas, geographical areas, and age of students. If we take the time to allow thinking to occur, students start to respond to each other, not the teacher, and work together cooperatively rather than competitively. Yet, in most classrooms across the country, finding teachers with three-second wait times is rare.

A: One of the things I am realizing again is how important reflection is to our understanding. Freire speaks of praxis as reflection **and** action on the world in order to transform it. In working on this project with Roxanne I have made an important realization about reflection, and about how action might be better informed through it. That that is that reflection is not simply solitary contemplation of events which have occurred previously. Neither can we assume that our perceptions which affect our reflection are even correct. We need to be informed by others who have other insights, other perspectives on what it is we are reflecting on. Reflection takes on power as it is opened up to collaborative involvement.

R: Response journals are one powerful way to encourage reflection. Before I worked with Ann, I had not been particularly successful with the use of journals in my classroom. I was not sure about how I felt about them. I found responding to the students in their journals a

difficult and time-consusming task. Because our class met on Monday and Wednesday afternoons, I would often spend all of my time between Monday and Wednesday resonding to the 15 journals I was responsible for. Although I spent a lot of time on each journal, many times I had only a few comments to write.

We switched groups in the middle of the semester so that each student would have the chance to dialogue with both of us. At the end of the semester, one of the students requested that Ann respond to her final entry. I decided to read Ann's comments to see how her response differed from mine.

Ann's responses were more insightful than mine. She seemed to be able to ask just the right question that promoted intellectual growth in the student. You could almost see this happening on the pages. I was depressed when I realized how surface my own comments seemed to be. I shared this feeling with a friend, who is a teacher of gifted children. She told me that I was experiencing cognitive dissonance, and that it was a normal part of learning. She said that she tells her students that thinking is often not easy, but confusing and upsetting and disabling. This is a natural part of intellectual growth, and one that should be expected. I felt a bit ashamed of myself, but, nonetheless, better after that. I was like my friend's young students. I

wanted to experience the pleasure of thinking without any effort or pain. Thinking takes time, effort, and patience. I realized that I need to learn to think in new ways, and the powerful role the journal can play in this process.

A: I came to believe in response journals during my own graduate studies at the University of Georgia. I had always wanted to write but I was one of those victims of the red marks on the pages of my own writing. I loved to write, to express myself through writing, but I had almost no confidence in my ability to do so. My professor for two of my graduate courses had us write response journals which he then used as dialogue journals.

It was the first time that someone really paid attention to what I was saying rather than pointing out how I could have said it better.

It was the first time that I felt someone valued what I was thinking enough to take time to respond to it himself. It was a liberating experience for me, and has really changed my life as a writer. I want to pass that experience on to my own students, even though it it very time-consuming.

R: [Transition here to Audrey]
Trying the spelling test on her own ___-year-old child; (her research paper) we asked her to present the results to the class. The inside story of her daughter's spellings and comments and explanations. Whole class took pride and interest in what she had done. Everyone engaged, delighted, impressed. Here the scoop was coming from the class itself. How what was for her a significant learning experience: she realy saw what it was about--became a signficant experience for the whole class.

A: Another student did her research paper on invented spelling. She shared with the class that what she had found in her research were the same kinds of things class members had been seeing and reporting.

R: Another turning point occurred when the class went from asking "When is this due?" or "How much time do we have to work on this?" to informing us that they needed more time for group work in writing conferences or on the literature webs.

A: Some of the change was rather subtle, or limited. Mike was a student who needed to check in with the teacher several times during class. In the beginning, he would want to make sure he was doing the right thing on an assignment, was constantly asking for more specific directions on "assignments." As the term went on, he changed: he still

checked in with me, but it was to let me know what he was doing rather than to find out if what he was doing was what was wanted.

A: We were able to observe and document some real change and growth among the students--in their perceptions of themselves as writers and learners:

On one of the final questionnaires, Sally wrote that at the beginning of the writing project, "My list of topics [that I could write about] didn't appeal to me. I felt no one else would be interested in what I wrote. Now I could go back to my topic list and write about any of them."

Sally said that the most important thing she had gotten from the course was "the feeling that I do have something to say / share through writing."

R: Audrey wrote this comment on her final feedback sheet: The most significant aspect of the course has been the increase in my self-confidence as an intelligent teacher whose feelings are significanat. It has been significant because I've gained courage.

A: After we did choral reading in class, one student did her research paper on choral reading. Said that the choral reading experiences had "turned all her thinking around": that she used to say to her kids about the poems in their

books, "You can read that on your own." Now, she says, she sees that poetry can be enjoyable. She wrote, "Now I'm so excited about using poetry in my class!"

R: There were evidences of the approach being translated into other areas. One music teacher developed a "whole language music curriculum"!

A: With all the positive responses students were having to class experiences, approach, several still said, "But I don't see how it can work in the classroom. I can't picture kids doing it."

R: There were many positive responses to the use of response journals. Many students commented that they felt empowered and listened to. Others talked abut the fact that even though it had been difficult, it was a helpful tool for learning. However, at the end, one student still commented that she still couldn't figure out what they were for: "whether it measured my responses or was a check to see if I read the material."

A: There were times that we realized that the roots of a "product" orientation run very deep. One student who seemed to have had a conversion with respect to seeing writing as a process still unconsciously held onto a **product** approach in drama. We were discussing improvisational drama

with its emphasis on process rather than product: a final performance. It was brought out that many children learn to fear drama when it's so performance oriented. This student came up with what was a sensibile solution to her: any student who was insecure about acting could work on the scenery! ASSUMING that the ultimate goal and focus was a production, a final product.

R: [transition to what we learned]
One of the things we learned was that in our debriefing process after each class, we were able to get in closer touch with the class. In that time of collaborative reflection while writing up our field notes, by sharing our perceptions, we often gained insight into the class. We were able to discover the class's or an individual's zone of proximal development, and therefore were able to plan activities and/or questitons that promoted student thought.

A: We found that our insights or perspectives came from a number of sources: from class discussion; from the response journals, and from our own later discussion and reflection as we sought collaboratively to find understanding and direction. I have come to have an awareness and respect for collaborative reflection as a powerful tool both in shaping curriculum and for the teacher as researcher.

R: This project has reconfirmed for me the value of collaborative learning and sharing power in classrooms. I'm struck by what can be accomplished when the learner engages in meaningful, purposeful learning. How can we better create college classrooms that reflect this kind of learning? There is so much more to learn, and so much further that we can go.

A: As a teacher, now I find that I return more questions to the class for discussion and response, and that I draw more consistently from their knowledge and experience. I provide more time for reflection--and I am confident that if I will provide time for reflection and discussion, difficult issues will be addressed, difficult answers will be provided, by the students themselves.

R: As I become more committed to collaborative learning, I realize that it is just as important in elementary classrooms as in college classrooms. I'm convinced that meaningful learning can take place in collaborative situations among students in elementary classrooms. As teachers, we take control of so many little things that the students could do just as well. Before, I might have studied teacher-student writing conferences; now I'm concentrating on peer writing conferences.

A: I find myself much more convinced, impassioned about finding ways to liberate and empower students through my course content and methods. And yet I realize a tension here too: between imposing my beliefs, my goals, my dreams, on students--and providing an environment in which they may get in touch with their own goals, their own dreams, for themselves and their students--and find ways to realize those dreams. And dealing with all of this in the context of a system that is not friendly to this kind of political change.

R: We invite you to participate in one of the most imortant experiences we felt occured in our language arts class: small group discussion. We'd like to ask you to form a group with two or three other people around you for the purpose of discususing some of the issues that have been brought up today. Each group will receive a sheet with possible discussion questions on it. Feel free to choose a different question if your whole group agrees. Choose one person who will act as recorder and report back to the large group when the discussion time is over. You'll have ____ minutes of discussion time.

"The Negotiated Curriculum as Praxis"

Possible Discussion Questions

1. How do we find the balance between imposing our dreams, beliefs, and goals in our classes and providing an environment where students can get in touch with their own dreams, beliefs, and goals?

2. How can we better create classes to reflect collaborative learning?

3. Do we as teachers abhor a vacuum? Do we overteach to get rid of the discomfort of vacuums? Do we perceive vacuums where there are really just times of reflection, analysis, contemplation or coming to a decision or judgment?